

San Antonio Express-News

Legal program aids U.S. troops

State bar offers free help to GIs being deployed

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Thursday, March 13, 2003

When a single mother who served several years as an Army air defense artillery officer suddenly was called to active duty last month, she needed to get her legal affairs in order - fast.

For help, she turned to a free program offered by the State Bar of Texas called LAMP, or Legal Assistance to Military Personnel.

The project, which originated during the Gulf War, offers free legal assistance to military personnel currently being deployed -everything from wills to apartment leases to how to handle finances for the family left behind, said Kimberly Schmitt, the state bar's public information director.

Local attorney Robert Taus, who spent 30 years in the Air Force before becoming a lawyer, said he jumped at the opportunity to help service members after hearing about the LAMP program.

Taus recently assisted the single mother, who was deployed more than two weeks ago. He helped her with several legal documents, including preparing a will, a trust and a directive that would inform a doctor of her wishes if she were to be placed on life support.

While legal services are offered at local military bases, Taus said, this client had to get her affairs in order in less than a month and didn't have time to wait.

"This case was a very rapid call-up," he said.

The LAMP program is particularly helpful to reservists who live in rural areas or parts of the state where they might not have easy access to military legal assistance offices, Taus said.

Schmitt said the project is only a supplement to legal aid provided through U.S. military branches.

"We don't want to get in the way of what the military might be offering," she said.

Attorneys volunteer for the pro bono program, and the state bar provides them with the training materials, Schmitt said.

"We're always looking for more volunteers," she said.

The American Bar Association is implementing the project nationwide.